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Power in research relationships: engaging mothers with learning difficulties in a parenting programme evaluation

Abstract

There are significant ethical considerations when engaging with the participants of a service evaluation study. These include the potential impact of the findings of the evaluation on the lives of those in receipt of the service. The importance of researcher reflexivity in these circumstances is vital. This paper describes one researcher's reflections about their own engagement with participants of an evaluation of a parenting course.

The potential contributors to the evaluation of the course that are the focus of this paper were 18 mothers with learning difficulties. All had been referred to the course because of concerns about their parenting capacity or the welfare of their child.

The power dynamics in the interactions between the researcher and the participants existed on a number of levels. The starting point was an asymmetrical power relation with the researcher defining the scope, content and conduct of the evaluation. Efforts to engage with the participants included trying to remodel some of this power and minimise the distance and separateness between each party. The parents too had some power, by using the interviews as a therapeutic space, providing socially desirable accounts, or ultimately jeopardising the evaluation of the programme by refusing to participate. In this unique context, the power relationships were dynamic and inter-linked, feeling like a dance between active agents within the negotiations. Elements of Tew's (2006) conceptual framework of 'productive' and 'limiting' modes of power were both in evidence and likely to have influenced the findings of the evaluation.

Introduction

There are many similarities between the processes and methods of research and evaluation, but what sets them apart is the purpose to which they are used (Parsons, 2017). Engagement with participants is one area where ethical considerations are potentially heightened in evaluation studies because of the potential impact of the findings of the evaluation on the lives of those so affected. This paper reflects on the experiences and feelings of one researcher conducting an evaluation of a parenting programme and her engagement with programme beneficiaries as contributors to the evaluation during four of the parenting programmes' introductory 'coffee mornings'. The programme beneficiaries were mothers described as having 'learning difficulties' and who were 'struggling with everyday life'; a small number of these mothers had a diagnosed learning disability. Evidence or 'data' is drawn from the researcher's research log written directly after the encounters with mothers attending the programme, and subsequent reflections on the engagement process. As an introduction to this engagement, this paper begins by discussing the importance of the researcher-participant relationship.

The researcher-participant relationship

The relationship between the researcher (interviewer) and participant (interviewee) when conducting qualitative interviews has been a recurrent concern in the literature about qualitative research methodologies (Råheim et al., 2016). Whilst qualitative interviewing can be '*a form of radical democratic practice*' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.X), it is also at risk of '*reflecting and reinforcing social forms of domination in Western consumer societies*' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005 p. 158). Particular challenges in the researcher participant relationship are that the social position, role

and status of the researcher can influence the response of participants (Richards and Emslie, 2000); researcher values, beliefs, and life experiences can influence the way in which interviews are conducted and the data is interpreted (Campbell and Wasco, 2000); and both the researcher and the participants may bring their own agendas to the research relationship (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009).

A common intention of research interviews is to '*minimize the distance and separateness of researcher-participant relationships*' (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009, p. 279). However the initial 'engagement' when a researcher presents themselves and their research to potential participants in order to try and develop a research relationship with them can be complex and influenced by the context, the researcher, the potential participants and any other actors involved. Using an allegory from child protection work, the initial engagement is '*more than the simple act of a professional engaging in initial conversations with a client*' (Platt, 2012, p.142). It needs to take into account the behavioural, attitudinal and relationship components which influence engagement, and to allow for a dynamic process with potential fluctuations in engagement over time.

Positioning of the researcher and research participants

The relational 'positioning' of the researcher and the research participants is of vital importance in qualitative interviews because of the potential power differentials that often exist in such a relationship. The researcher and research participants will hold a range of positions that are contributed to by personal history, background, age, gender, stage of life, educational level, social class and so on. These positions can move or change as people relate and react to others (Merriam et al., 2001).

Power and social relationships

Although power can be considered to be a contested concept (Lukes, 2005), power is a dynamic in social relationships '*that may open up or close off opportunities to individual and groups*' (Tew, 2002, p.165). Power may exist in multiple ways in social relationships, with individuals and groups able to use power in a wide variety of ways – something that undoubtedly applies during interactions within research interviews (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2002). Of help in understanding the potential influences of power in research interviews is Tew's (2006) conceptual framework that describes 'productive' and 'limiting' modes of power. Productive modes of power include 'protective' power that is used to safeguard vulnerable people and their possibilities for advancement, and 'co-operative' power that is based on valuing commonality and difference and using collective action, sharing, and mutual support and challenge. Limiting modes of power include 'oppressive' power where differences are exploited to enhance one's own position and resources at the expense of others, and 'collusive' power where people come together to exclude or suppress 'otherness' (Tew, 2006, p.41). Tew stresses these are not fixed forms of power: different forms of power may interlink (for example oppressive power may be secured by collusion), and one form of power may shift into another (for example a co-operative initiative may become oppressive over time). Within the research context, we can foresee the possibility that researchers may take a 'protective' stance to participants perceived to be vulnerable and that they could be oppressive or collude with others in a desire to conduct their research.

Ethics and Evaluation

The potentially heightened ethical considerations when engaging with the participants of an evaluation (rather than research study) connect power differentials with the outcome of the evaluation. At its essence is the fundamental difference in power between the person or agency conducting the evaluation, and the recipients or stakeholders of the service that is being evaluated. Researchers conducting evaluations are often engaging with beneficiaries of an intervention as participants, who may be from vulnerable or disadvantaged groups in society, who are being supported by the intervention and for whom the findings from that intervention may have significant consequences. Parsons (2017) argues that for evaluations to be effective and credible, '*evidence gathering and interpretation needs to be seen to be just, fair and independent*' (p.36). The emphasis on transparency is crucial here, with researchers being free from any potential conflicts of interest, demonstrating high standards of integrity and honesty, and being free from any coercion to include or discount particular evidence or the interpretation of their findings. Reflexivity is one way of supporting transparency.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is '*a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research*' (Berger, 2015) in that it can help us to understand the relational 'positioning' of the researcher and the research participants and how the power dynamic in the relationship is operating. Being reflexive or maintaining a continual self-critical internal dialogue is one way of contributing to the validity of research or evaluation (Strauss and Corbin, 2008; Mitchell and Irvine, 2008; Pillow, 2003) through robust analytical thought and reflection that provides insight into potential imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative interviews.

As part of the reflexive process, there are a number of key questions to be considered when a researcher is thinking about their relationships with the research participants and how the power dynamic in the relationship is operating (Bahns and Weatherhill, 2012; Grant, 2014; Johnson and Macleod, 2013; Platt, 2012). Key questions include:

- Who is researcher?
- Who are the research participants?
- What is the context for the interaction?
- How do the parties involved in the negotiation interact?
- What 'types' of power are being used, how and by whom?

These are the questions that form the starting point for the rest of this paper and one researcher's reflections about their own engagement with contributors to an evaluation of a parenting programme at recruitment to the evaluation, and during interviews with the participants. We begin by introducing the researcher and research participants.

The researcher

I am the mother of two young boys and an experienced researcher and evaluator based within the Disability Studies centre of a leading UK university.

Over the past ten years, most of my work has focused on the support needs of parents with learning difficulties, which has entailed listening to the personal experiences of these parents. This has given me a deep awareness of the social issues arising from poverty and social isolation that can impact on the parenting ability of mothers with learning difficulties. Whilst recognising the paramount importance of the child's welfare, I am also aware from discussions with parents

with learning difficulties that they often need tailored pro-active support to ensure the well-being of their children. I am not a parents' rights activist, but consciously and deliberately use strategies to empower the parents, ensure that their voices are central to any research or evaluation, and position myself as both supportive to them and separate from any 'gatekeepers' who may be helping me to access them. On this basis, my approach could loosely be described as 'feminist' (Ackerly and True, 2008; Letherby, 2003) in that through my research to-date I have sought to challenge and address some of the social inequalities faced by mothers with learning difficulties, beginning from the views and experiences of the mothers themselves.

The participants in the evaluation

The mothers

Potential contributors to the evaluation of the parenting course included 18 mothers with learning difficulties who attended a parenting course. One mothers had a diagnosed learning disability; one mother was described as being on the autistic spectrum; and the other mothers had milder learning difficulties that resulted in them 'struggling with everyday life', literacy, numeracy and understanding abstract concepts. Some of the mothers had additional health and support needs resulting from physical or mental health difficulties and alcohol or drug misuse, and lived in circumstances dominated by complex and challenging arrangements. Ten mothers currently had a child or children that were subject to child protection plans. Six of the eighteen mothers had had a child or children previously removed from their care.

Each of the mothers had a volunteer mentor who met with them individually for one to two hours each week of the parenting course to help consolidate the mothers' learning and support them in transferring their learning from the group to their home setting.

The parenting programme facilitators

The parenting course was facilitated by professionals from a variety of backgrounds, including health visitors, family support workers, family support managers and a therapist. These were also potential contributors to the evaluation of the parenting programme. All were experienced facilitators of parenting courses who had attended additional training about the needs of parents with learning difficulties. Two of the facilitators had no children, and one commented that she felt that this resulted in mothers engaging with her in a 'different' way to the other facilitators.

The context for the interaction

Mellow Futures is an adapted perinatal programme for parents with learning difficulties which aims to improve parent-child relationships through early intervention and attuned parenting in the early years. Funding for the development, piloting and evaluation of the programme was from the Department of Health in England from 2012-2015, and as such, the evaluation was built into the parenting programme from its inception. I was asked to evaluate the programme in England due to my previous research experience and knowledge of positive practice with parents with learning difficulties. The aims of the evaluation were to provide independent scrutiny of the parenting programme, explore which aspects of the

programme were beneficial and which could be improved upon, and use the information to further develop and extend the programme if appropriate. The evaluation had ethical approval from the School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bristol. Author (2015, 2016) provide a detailed account of the parenting programme, Mellow Futures, (www.mellowparenting.org) and the full findings of the evaluation.

The evaluation included the mothers at the start and end of each of the elements of the parenting programme they were involved with. Some mothers attended the 6 week pre-birth and 14 week post-birth course (4 interviews in total per mother) while others just attended the post-birth course (2 interviews per mother). The length of the interviews varied, but averaged about 15 minutes.

Many of the mothers attending the course had thought it was a good idea when told about it by a professional and saw it as an opportunity to make some friends and learn more about their baby. They spoke of being socially isolated and knowing no other mothers. A quarter of the mothers said that they felt 'forced' to attend by their baby's social worker or it been strongly recommended to them by their child's social worker, a recommendation that they felt they had to take. It could be said that the mothers attending the programme had little power or social capital (Chenoweth and Stehlik, 2004; Emerson and Hatton, 2007).

All of the facilitators expressed that they were committed to the mothers and to the success of this new, innovative programme which they, and the Mellow Parenting charity, believed had the potential to improve mothers' abilities to care for their

babies; they all wanted a positive evaluation. Therefore, the facilitators welcomed me into their introductory coffee mornings.

How the parties involved in the negotiation interacted

Initial interactions

My first interaction with the mothers was at the programmes' introductory 'coffee mornings' prior to the start of the parenting course. From the outset, the power dynamic in 'positioning' myself as a researcher in contrast to the potential participants of the evaluation of the parenting programme was apparent in two key ways: how I met with the mothers and the role and support of the course facilitators.

My presentation

Many years ago I had an encounter with a research participant that influenced my approach to engaging with subsequent participants. On this occasion, the participant told me that she knew I wasn't a social worker because I was on time and because I didn't have a typical bag that social workers usually carry (ie. a large bag that holds case files). Since then I have always been mindful of my initial impression and in this instance tried to be 'neutral' rather than 'professional' in my approach, to create some distance between myself and professionals who may be perceived as being intrusive and threatening to the mothers' family life. I strove to 'present' myself as an 'ally' who wanted to ensure their voice was heard, thus reducing my 'power' in the situation. For my first (and subsequent) meeting with the mothers I dressed in a relaxed way, wearing jeans and a top, and carried a rucksack rather than a work-bag. My attire was similar to the mothers and mentors and slightly less formal than the programme facilitators who did not wear jeans. I presented as chatty and

relaxed, behaving in a slightly more extrovert way than I would naturally in a new group. I saw it as my 'role' to be friendly, interested and approachable.

Meeting the mothers

I arrived at the meeting venue before the mothers, so that I could meet the facilitators, all but one of whom I did not already know, and to explain the purpose and process for conducting the evaluation of the programme. As the mothers arrived I welcomed them and offered them a drink. At the time it felt natural and needed to be done as the facilitators were busy paying for taxis and answering questions about practical issues such as the length of the session. Taking on this role felt (to me) to be supportive to the facilitators as there was no-one actually welcoming the mothers, and supportive to the mothers who may have been anxious about attending the parenting group for the first time. It also fulfilled a need in me to be 'doing' something as I did not feel comfortable sitting and waiting as the 'invited guest' which would have drawn attention to me and the 'importance' of the evaluation. However, something as straightforward as welcoming a person and offering them a drink could be perceived to be proprietorial and an exercise of power in that I was 'in control' of the tea and coffee.

Explaining about the evaluation

Time was set aside during this first meeting for me to explain about the evaluation to the mothers, including the consent I was seeking: to speak with them, their mentor and a key professional in their life, usually the social worker responsible for the baby's welfare, or another professional who was closely involved with the family such as a health visitor or family support worker involved with Child Protection plans

(their 'key professional'). I provided each mother with an easy-to-read information sheet and used this as a prompt for the discussion. The easy-to-read information sheet utilised the principles of the Accessible Information Standard (Marsay, 2017) in that concepts were presented in a concrete way, using short easy words and supplemented with pictures which aimed to explain the text.

The information sheet and my own explanations clearly stated that I was a researcher based at a university. I stressed that I wanted to learn from the mothers about their experiences of the parenting programme, positioning them as 'experts', and explained that their contribution to the evaluation of the programme could help other mothers in the future if the evaluation identified ways to improve the programme. I was also very clear that their participation was voluntary and that they 'didn't have to take part'.

My power and positioning

At this stage again I was aware that I had significant power in the process. I had decided how to introduce the evaluation to the potential participants and the amount and quality of the information offered was at my discretion. I had identified myself as: both an outsider (a researcher from a university) and an insider (a mother – I was asked if I had children during these initial conversations as being a mother implied a shared maternal understanding), not a social care professional but an ally, in the desire to establish good relationships with the mothers and engage their participation. I was mindful that I needed some mothers at least to be interviewed as part of the evaluation of the parenting programme and that the enterprise would likely fail without this. It was also important to remember that many of the mothers

were starting from a relatively disadvantaged power-less position: most if not all of them would have been subject to the 'structural oppression' of a society (Goodley, 2001) that often believes that people with learning difficulties cannot parent successfully; all had previously been in contact with services concerned about the care and welfare of their children; and all were attending the parenting course because they had been considered to be parents who were struggling to care for their children.

The support of the facilitators

The facilitators used their position in the parenting programme to facilitate contact between myself as a researcher and potential interviewees. In many respects, they were the 'gatekeepers' or 'intermediaries' who had the power to grant or withhold access to the people required for the evaluation and to provide support or backing for the project (De Laine, 2000).

I met with the facilitators before meeting the mothers in order to explain the purpose and process for conducting the evaluation of the programme. I was aware at this point that my presence at the parenting programme could be perceived as threatening: if the evaluation of the programme was not successfully conducted or positive in its outcome it could herald the closure of the programme. However, the facilitators did not appear threatened by the evaluation, rather they appeared to see it as a chance to show how good the programme was.

My presence at the start of the session indicated that I was accepted by the facilitators, and this was confirmed in the facilitators' introductions which stressed

how important the evaluation was. Whilst at one level, this was very supportive and welcoming, it may also have introduced an element of pressure for the mothers, with the facilitators using their positional power over the mothers to influence them to take part in the evaluation.

A second example of the facilitators potentially exerting pressure on or power over the mothers to take part in the evaluation was when I was explaining confidentiality and consent processes. During the course of the explanations, the facilitators added apparently supportive comments and tended to 'jump in' to the discussion to provide reassurance or further explanations about the consent process and its implications. I politely tried to inhibit this with comments such as 'I'm getting to that' or to restate that even though the mother's involvement would be really helpful, they definitely did not have to take part if they did not want to. Once again, however, I was left with the impression that the enthusiasm of the facilitators to support the evaluation may have been pressurising for some of the mothers.

Where was the power?

In reflecting on the position and power of the facilitators in the evaluation of the parenting programme Clark's (2010) description of the mechanisms that support the engagement of 'gatekeepers' is of relevance. Clark argues that the motivation for gatekeepers to engage with research comes from political representation, civic and moral responsibility to engage, and the desire to identify good practice and facilitate change. In the context of the evaluation, we can see elements of each of these motivations. First, the facilitators would likely want to represent their own aims and interests and support an activity (the evaluation) that would ensure that the

parenting programme would be constructively articulated and legitimated. Indeed as we have already mentioned, all of the facilitators had expressed that they were committed to the mothers and to the success of the programme and wanted a positive evaluation. Secondly, it was clear from the facilitators that they were keen to identify good practice that could then be used to facilitate the development of the parenting programme. Finally, as employees of an organisation committed to the parenting programme, it is likely that the facilitators perceived that they had a duty to engage with the evaluation.

Taken together, these motivations set up a potential power imbalance between the facilitators who were keen for the mothers to take part in the evaluation, and the mothers who may have felt they 'should' take part. This resulted in me being positioned awkwardly between them trying to protect the mothers' right to refuse consent even though this would impact on the evaluation.

The mothers' responses and engagement with the evaluation

There was a range of responses to my attempts to engage with the mothers as participants in the evaluation: most of the mothers were keen to participate; one refused; and one was keen to engage but presented a story of her life which was completely at odds with the view of the mother's situation presented by her key professional.

Sharing everything

For some mothers, talking to a relatively unknown interested person appeared to be cathartic. One mother, for example, tried to tell me details about her life before she

had formally consented to take part in the evaluation, as my reflective notes describe:

'I sit beside her and ask quietly if it is okay [if she would like to take part]. She is straight out of her seat making for the interview room. She starts telling me things about her life and previously removed child. I stop her, telling her to keep this information for when we have gone through the consent process fully. It would be so easy to just let her talk at this point, but I need confirmation that she knows what will happen to what I can already perceive to be highly personal and sensitive information about herself. I notice many scars on her arm from cutting herself. She is bursting to talk and mentions at one point that it is like counselling. I respond that it isn't really, as I can't help her work through issues and won't see her again until the end of the programme.'

The comment from this participant that the interviews were '*like counselling*' was not unusual (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Qualitative researchers typically build rapport with interviewees and use the skills of attentive listening, reflection and clarification to ensure that they have fully understood the interviewee's views and experiences. These may be perceived by participants as therapeutic if it is helpful for them to narrate detailed stories that may otherwise be unheard. However, in therapy or therapeutic interventions the main goal is a change in the person brought about by new insights or emotional changes. In research the main goal is the advancement of knowledge, and it may be unethical for research interviews to stimulate new personal reflections or emotional changes (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005).

There were several key challenges for me here. First, it seemed to me that some of the mothers used the interviews as an opportunity to process thoughts and feelings

about their often difficult interactions with services. However, in encouraging interviewees to reflect on and tell their stories and providing the time and attention for this to happen, I risked '*paving the way for participants to reveal wells of sensitive information*' (Råheim et al., 2016, p.5), so opening up thoughts and feelings without the opportunity to work them through and at risk of causing harm to them. Secondly, in being empathetic I felt at times that I was in danger of colluding with some of the views expressed, particularly about the mothers' experiences of services. It felt as though there was a fine line between offering affirmative nods and supportive comments in order to invite and allow disclosures, and the mothers feeling that I was agreeing with what they were saying. Thirdly, I was mindful that I was planning to interview the mothers more than once, and did not want to blur my role by becoming 'a friend' to the mothers, something that is a challenge with repeated interviews (Hewitt, 2007; Råheim et al., 2016). I tried to forestall this by stressing that I was a researcher and would only be meeting with the mothers as part of the evaluation.

Many of the mothers did share deeply personal information about their life-history in their interviews, and I did not stop them telling me their stories if they wanted to. The mothers had been referred to the parenting programme because of concerns about their ability to parent, so much of the information they shared was highly relevant in this respect. However I did not 'pry' into their histories and kept all of my questions focused on the present, mindful that overly intrusive interviewing can cause anxiety, distress, guilt, and damage to participants' self-esteem (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993).

Presenting an 'ideal world'

Of particular interest was one mother who was very willing to participate in the evaluation. She appeared to be one of the most able mothers in the group and I felt comfortable that she understood the process and implications of taking part. As with all of the mothers, I listened to and accepted her views about the positive family life she described at face value. However, there were significant inconsistencies between the mother's view of her circumstances, and those of the key professional, who knew her well, for whom she gave consent for me to interview. The mother spoke lovingly about how she looked after her baby and, I believe deliberately, gave me the impression that the child was in her full-time care. The key professional however, indicated that the mother's baby had been removed from her and her partner's care, and that her attendance at the programme was to support her in developing an appropriate relationship with her baby during contact sessions.

Research participants may provide moderated or selective descriptions because of the need for positive self-regard (Hewitt, 2007), external approval, or to provide socially desirable accounts (Collins, Shattell and Thomas, 2005). From a psychotherapeutic perspective, Rogers (1959) argues that beliefs and behaviours that are congruent with a person's image of them self are permitted into their awareness, whereas those that are not are distorted or denied. In reflecting on why this mother expressed a positive story about her life and avoided talking about what would have been for her a difficult realisation about her ability to care for her child, I wondered why she had taken part in the interview at all. It may have been that she wanted to (or wanted be seen to be) supporting the evaluation of the programme but had not realised what this might entail or that she felt uncomfortable sharing the

reality of her life with a stranger. It may also have been because she wanted some one-to-one interaction and used the research interview as an opportunity for this, or that she felt she 'should' take part as the facilitators had stressed the importance of the evaluation. Whatever her reasons, it was a salutary reminder to me that participant stories may represent only one version of reality, that the 'truth' may be perceived and reported in many different ways for different reasons, and that there are many different ways of participants using their power.

What 'types' of power are being used, how and by whom?

Returning to Tew's (2006) conceptual framework that describes 'productive' and 'limiting' modes of power, we can see elements of each of these modes of power in my reflections about interviewing the mothers attending the parenting programme. In these unique contexts, the power relationships were definitely dynamic, inter-linked and existed on a number of levels at one time, feeling like a dance as we engaged and developed relationships between us while being aware of our positions in the room – mothers, facilitators and researcher. We were all active agents within the negotiations, we all came from various positions which were not static, and we all had some power and the ability to use it, including by resisting or coercing during the sensitive interactions.

My power as the evaluator

Our starting point was an asymmetrical power relation. As a researcher conducting an evaluation of the parenting programme I defined the interview situation, initiated the interviews, determined and posed the questions or topics to be covered, followed up on responses to ensure my understanding, and was able to terminate

the conversation. In addition, as part of the consent process I had made it clear to the mothers that if they disclosed information that indicated that their child or another person may be at risk of harm, I had a duty to break our confidentiality agreement and report the information to an appropriate agency. The research interview was '*not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners*'...[it was]...'*a means serving the researcher's ends*' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005, p.164).

Nevertheless, I attempted to employ co-operative power as I endeavoured to engage the mothers so that their voice was central to the evaluation, and protective power in safeguarding the mothers' rights to refuse to participate in the interviews and in ensuring their full informed consent.

The mothers' power

The mothers too did have some power in our relationship. Ultimately, they could refuse to participate in the evaluation. The one mother who did refuse seemed to be fearful about my presence and the possible negative consequences of engaging with an unknown person she perceived as a professional. I discovered through the initial introductions that this mother felt forced to attend the parenting programme and was very unhappy about being there. My research log recorded:

'One mum – had been outside smoking... clearly not sure about talking to me because of 'personal issues' which I take to mean previous interactions with children's services.'

In refusing to participate in the evaluation this mother indeed wielded a substantial amount of power. The strength of her opposition was expressed openly in the group, resulting in some mothers who had, until this point expressed a desire to take part, to begin to reconsider. My research notes record that:

'Their trust visibly wavered; they looked very uncomfortable and unsure and started looking anywhere but at me'.

I acknowledged the mother's position and made no attempt to persuade her or ask her why she did not want to take part. I also reiterated the confidential nature of the evaluation and clearly restated that every mother had the right to say no and no one should feel pressured or persuaded otherwise. But it was a challenging and uncomfortable situation for me as the researcher. There was a significant danger of the mother who did not want to participate in the evaluation using a form of 'oppressive' power (Tew, 2006) to garner support for her position from the other mothers, and the mothers collectively to use 'collusive' power in coming together to devalue the evaluation. What was particularly difficult for me was that I did not want to exert any power over the mothers or persuade them to take part if they did not want to, and nor did I want to show the stress I felt in this risk to the evaluation if I could not maintain the engagement of the majority of the mothers.

A second way in which the mothers exerted power in our relationship was in their nomination of a key professional who knew them well. One element of the evaluation was to assess the impact of the parenting programme on the mothers' parenting and the outcomes for the children from the perspective of a key professional involved with the family. Ultimately, I had envisaged that the professional contacted would be the one who referred them to the programme. Although none of the mothers refused to allow me to contact a professional who knew them, they sometimes refused to allow me to contact the professional who had referred them to the programme, implying that this person was critical of their parenting and would not give a good account of them. Instead, they gave consent

for me to speak with another professional who knew them who they felt they had a more positive relationship with, such as a family support worker, adult social worker or advocate.

The facilitators' power

The facilitators, while very well meaning, did demonstrate elements of collusive and oppressive power in supporting the evaluation. As already mentioned, they used their position in the parenting programme to facilitate contact between myself as a researcher and potential interviewees, and they had vested interests in a 'good' evaluation taking place.

Concluding comments

The evaluation of the parenting programme was 'sensitive' in that it *'potentially pose[d] a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it'* (Lee, 1993, p.4). It posed an 'intrusive threat' in that I was intruding into areas that were *'private, stressful or sacred'* (Lee, 1993, p.4); there was the ever-present 'threat of sanction' with the possibility that the discussions with the mothers may reveal information that was stigmatising or incriminating in some way; and there was 'political threat' where an evaluation that reported the programme to be failing could potentially stop the parenting programme. In fact, the evaluation was positive: the mothers 'loved' the programme, trusted the facilitators, shared deeply about their lives, made friends, learnt new skills, and improved their relationships with their babies. The improvement in the majority of babies' outcomes was confirmed by the key professionals (Author, 2015).

Given that there was so much at stake it was little surprise that complex power relationships were at play in the evaluation of the parenting programme. As researchers we have a responsibility to be reflexive and to try to explain how power dynamics relate to the knowledge that has been created (Mitchell and Irvine, 2008). Some of the power dynamics are more obvious than others. This paper has provided an insight into some of the complex power dynamics that were inherent in the engagement negotiations. It has, however, been written from the perspective of the researcher using the questions I drew together from relevant literature. The mothers and facilitators may each have different perspectives about the actual or perceived power they had in the relationship and how this was realised or not.

Questions for researchers

Using the following questions could help researchers to prepare for their research engagement interactions or research interactions generally:

- Who am I? What image do I wish to present to the potential participants? ie How should I present myself – in terms of dress, speech, positioning?
- Who are the research participants? What is their social situation? What power do they have? How can I support their positive engagement without pressurising them?
- Where is the research interaction taking place? What other factors do I need to be aware of? What influence might gatekeepers or other parties have?

During the research interactions, researchers also need to be continually aware of:

- The role they are playing in the interactions and the impact this is having.

- How the research participants are engaging with them.
- The role played by other parties present during the interactions ie what 'types' of power are being used, how and by whom?

A final question

One final question that should be posed in this paper is: Would I change how I presented myself and acted during these engagement activities? The honest answer is 'no'. I believe that the way in which I dressed, acted and presented the evaluation aligned with my many years of research experience and my desire to respect and empower the mothers with learning difficulties while evaluating the programme as fairly as possible. I was part of the unique, dynamic, context specific 'dance' with the mothers and facilitators as we worked through whether the mothers would freely give informed consent to take part in the evaluation and share information about themselves and babies who were so important to them.

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Key words:

Research engagement; power; research reflexivity; parents with learning difficulties.